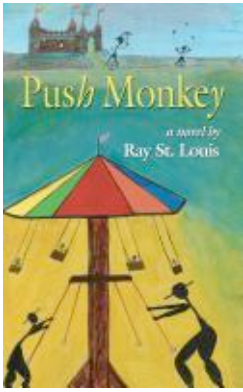




Push Monkey

a novel by
Ray St. Louis



Valerie Polanski (a.k.a. Sunny), age 17, lands a job as a push monkey - human powered ride operator - at her local Renaissance festival. Over her mother's objections, Sunny hits the road with the ride company and the adventure begins. As she travels from fair to fair, Sunny adapts to the "rennie" lifestyle: prolonged tent living, fair affairs, Bizarre Bazaars and Funky Formals. Meanwhile, others are working to bring her freewheeling new life to an end...

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Ray St. Louis

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First Edition

Four.

Sunday I got up early and got into my costume. After brushing my teeth and splashing a little water on my face at a water spigot, I walked down to the fair site to look around. I had over an hour to kill before the push monkey meeting, so it was a good time to do a little exploring.

It occurred to me early morning on a fair day is the best time to experience a Renaissance festival. People are beginning to do little chores around their booths to prepare for the day, sweeping floors, restocking shelves, dusting wares, firing up glass-blowing furnaces and stoking blacksmithing fires. The comforting scent of wood smoke mixed with the aroma of roasting fair food permeated the grounds. Here and there actors in costume were warming up—stretching their muscles or vocal cords in preparation for a day of knightly combat or courtly song. I saw a man in kilts standing in a grove of small shade trees warming up his bagpipe while he walked slowly and majestically between the tree trunks. At the petting zoo, roosters were crowing and sheep bleating. I waved to Lars, who was cleaning the pens and throwing down fresh straw. He returned the wave unenthusiastically. I guess I was off his radar.

I couldn't help but notice what a chipper mood the whole world seemed to be in. It made me smile just soaking up the ambient goodwill (excellent word, "ambient." Clearly, my mental word-processor was starting out the day in fine form). It was this positive energy that had attracted me last year when I'd spent a day as a tourist, or customer, one of those who paid to get in. I'd already heard a couple of the push monkeys use the word "patron," but I thought of a patron as some rich person who gives a portion of their wealth to support the arts. Which, come to think of it, was what our customers did, although on a lesser scale because few of them were rich. So calling them "patrons" would be flattering them with praise to make them feel more import...

I figured out right then and there why we called them "patrons."

As I wandered around soaking up the good vibes, I felt my old self coming back—the little girl my grandpa had nicknamed Sunny. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this way. Probably before my parents got divorced. The first few years after the divorce I saw my dad once or twice a year on Christmas or the Fourth of July. The past three years I hadn't seen him at all, just rare phone conversations. But why waste time on negativity on a glorious morning like this?

The rich smell of coffee mixed with cinnamon and some kind of meat (Canadian bacon?) drew me

to the coffee booth near the slide. It turned out it was the only shop selling any kind of pre-opening breakfast. Since I now had some money in my pocket from yesterday's pay, I treated myself to eggs and potatoes and toast and Canadian bacon (I was right) and a large coffee. At the last second I had the girl behind the counter add a muffin. I hadn't eaten anything the previous day except Meg and Tom's Hamburger Helper, and felt suddenly famished.

I sat down on a tree bench in front of the booth to wait for my breakfast to come up. In the background, some lively music with string instruments and drums and some kind of high-pitched flute was playing. It was kind of like bluegrass but not quite. It was very upbeat, happy music that made you want to get up and dance. I knew I was going to show my ignorance, but I had to know what type of music it was. I asked a man in a graying beard and ponytail who was also waiting for his breakfast.

"It's Irish music, or Celtic if you prefer. I think this particular song is called 'The Harvest Home'. It's a hornpipe."

"That whistle-like instrument? It's called a hornpipe?"

He laughed. "The instrument is a penny whistle. The type of song is a hornpipe."

"Thank you," I said.

"You don't get out much, do you?"

“I guess not.”

By now my breakfast had come up and I plunged into it enthusiastically. Some of the other push monkeys began to dribble in. First Wesley with cousin Noah in tow—the older cousin standing a full head taller than the younger and at least fifty pounds heavier—then Shaman and a thin white girl that must have been his girlfriend. Jeremy, in a wide brim hat with a coon’s tail hanging down in back, followed a few minutes later by Sheena, our big female ride pusher. Finally, Hard Rock, looking a little bleary-eyed and still in street clothes.

I grabbed my coffee and muffin—by then all that was left of my breakfast—and joined the group on the coffee shop’s main dining deck. The initial conversation focused on the weather which, I was beginning to learn, was the main variable determining how big a crowd was likely to show up, and consequently how much money they—we—could expect to make.

The talk shifted to how stiff or not-so-stiff everyone felt after the first day. I gathered that the last time any of them had done any pushing was a month ago at a fair called FLARF. This reminded me of something Wesley said last night.

“So there are others of these fairs? Didn’t you call it a circuit, Wesley?”

“Yeah, the Renaissance festival circuit. They’re all over. We do, what, seven or eight of them?”

That got Hard Rock counting on his fingers. "Let's see, Hoggetowne, FLARF, GARF, Sterling, Tuxedo but we're getting out of that one, ORF, and LARF. Seven, soon to be six."

"Wow," I said, "I thought this was the only one."

"They're all over the country," Wesley said.

I directed my next question at Hard Rock, "Which one from your list is this one?"

"GARF—Georgia Renaissance Festival."

"I get it. So FLARF would be Florida Renaissance Festival."

"That's right."

"What's ORF, Orlando?"

"Ohio."

"And LARF must be Louisiana."

"Yep," Wesley chimed in, "Hoggetowne—two g's, extra e's—is in Gainesville, Florida, which used to be called Hogtown—spelled normal—back in pioneer times. Sterling is near the town of Sterling in upstate New York. Tuxedo is near the town of Tuxedo in downstate New York, not far from New York City."

"Oh look," said a man in a gaudy red, yellow and black costume as he was passing by our table, his breakfast in hand, "it's a whole pack of push monkeys!"

"Who's he?" I asked Wesley quietly.

"One of the Pirate Boys. They're a stage act."

“Wouldn’t that be a pride of push monkeys?” one of his identically dressed Pirate Boy colleagues interjected from their table across the room.

That got the whole breakfast crowd going, Pirate Boys, push monkeys, everyone. People shouted out their ideas—

“A gaggle of push monkeys!”

“A flock of push monkeys!”

“A herd of push monkeys!”

“Of course I’ve heard of push monkeys, you fool!” the normally-serious Sheena quipped, surprising everyone.

“Bad-dum ching!” Wesley added, miming the rim shot with a pair of plastic forks.

“A stench of push monkeys!” It was one of Pirate Boys again.

“A circle jerk of Pirate Boys!” Hard Rock retaliated, eliciting both laughs and groans from the breakfast crowd.

The banter continued back and forth with some more serious suggestions: a troop, a barrel, a tribe of push monkeys.

As I was listening to this, my mind went off on its favorite sidetrack—cool words. I said “A passel of push monkeys” more or less to myself.

Wesley, sitting next to me said, “Say that again.”

“A passel of push monkeys.”

“That’s it,” Wesley decided. “That’s perfect. Don’t you all think that’s perfect?” He posed the

question to the room rather than anyone in particular.

"I can see it," Hard Rock said. "A passel of push monkeys," he repeated, trying it on for size. "Yeah, I think it works." The breakfast crowd probed the question from various angles. Little by little everyone agreed that the official term henceforth for a group of people who pushed human-powered rides for a living would be "a passel of push monkeys."

"We'll get Gully to make a T-shirt of it," Wesley said.

I couldn't help feeling a little pride that the group had settled on my idea. I wondered if it was something I would brag about in the future ("You know the phrase 'a passel of push monkeys?' I thought of that!").

"You going to eat that muffin or just play with it like a cat with a ball of yarn?" Wesley asked.

"You can have it. Consider it payment for letting me share your tent last night."

This got a reaction from the Pirate Boy sitting closest to our table. "Oh, oh! Monkey love! Boy and girl monkeys sleeping together. I'm shocked!"

Hard Rock, Wesley and I exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

"What?" the uncomprehending Pirate Boy asked.

Wesley smiled at him. "Boy are you barking up the wrong tree."

Push Monkey

The fair day passed uneventfully, which was fine with me after the previous day's drama. I got a lot more involved in hawking the ride. Once I got past my initial shyness and realized I could fake a British accent as well as the next person, and after listening to the types of lines the other push monkeys were throwing out, I started hawking up a storm. Seriously, you couldn't shut me up. Hard Rock Roger even complimented me when he came by the slide to give me a break. The experience did, however, make me want to learn how to really speak the Queen's English instead of faking it. Maybe someday I could get a lesson from one of the actors.

During my break I caught a bit of a show, a musical group playing what I now knew to be Irish music (or "Celtic" if you prefer). A girl was dancing, spinning and twirling with a lot of kicking steps thrown in, all the dancing happening from the waist down. How I'd managed to get through the better part of eighteen years without being aware of a significant block of culture was mind-boggling. I could probably recite the names of every one of the past five years' finalists on *American Idol* and list a dozen other reality shows, and every member of at least ten rock bands. But I couldn't identify a whole tradition of music except to say it kind of sounded like bluegrass. To be fair, it's not like I'd never heard that kind of music before. It's more like I'd never put two and two together. I imagine

there are older people who couldn't put a name to hip-hop or techno music. That doesn't mean they'd never heard it. And now, watching this girl dance, I realized I'd seen that style of dancing on TV—I think it was called Lord of the Dance. Somehow, I'd never put the label "Irish" on it.

The group I was watching now had some of their own CD's that the dancing girl was selling out of a wicker basket. I made a note to purchase a CD the next weekend. It would take all the money I made this weekend to get my own tent and pay my camping fee. If I was lucky, I would have enough left to buy a cooler and stock up on some food.

After count-out at the end of the day followed by a shower, I was relaxing in front of Wesley's tent when someone down at the campground entrance yelled "POLICE COMING! POLICE COMING!"

Several people scurried for their tents or vehicles, presumably to better hide (or perhaps swallow) their stashes of pot. I saw an electric golf cart turn into the cul-de-sac, followed by a police car, followed by a car I immediately recognized—my mother's.

"ROGER THOMPSON! ROGER THOMPSON!"

Hard Rock winced. Nothing good ever happened that began with people calling him by

his legal name. He'd have to finish his paperwork later.

He stepped outside the motorhome and found Hattie, the crafter lady who ran the campground, seated on a golf cart.

"Do you have a girl named Valerie Polanski working for you?"

"Valerie Polanski?"

"Also known as Sunny?"

"Oh, Sunny...yes we do. What's up?" Hard Rock glanced at the police car idling near the dumpsters. As he watched, a small silver car came to a stop directly behind the police cruiser, and an older, sterner-looking version of Sunny, got out of the car.

"Can you produce her for us?" Hattie was seventy-ish, with a husky smoker's voice, so the words came out less like a request than a demand.

"Yeah, I can get her." He walked across the cul-de-sac to Wesley's camp, where the big, blond dragon-pusher was coming out of his tent.

"Where's Sunny?"

Wesley hesitated. "She's...inside."

"Well, she's gotta come out. The police are here."

"Yeah, okay, I'll bring her out." Wesley stepped back inside. Hard Rock could hear their muffled voices—Wesley gently coaxing and Sunny weakly resisting. A moment later Wesley re-emerged with Sunny in tow.

"C'mon, let's see if we can clear this up," the road manager said, trying to sound reassuring.

Sunny didn't answer or even look up. Hard Rock led Wesley and Sunny to where the authority figures were waiting. Their little procession seemed suddenly rather formal and somber, like leading a condemned person to her execution. The image of Joan of Arc came to mind.

The stern woman—Sunny without the nose rings and the Goth-black hair topped with blue—spoke first.

"Get your things, you're coming home with me."

"No I'm not," Sunny replied, defiant but collected, still staring at the ground. Roger noticed how her bearing gave her a kind of dignity, a measure of righteousness.

"Yes you are. Until you're eighteen, you have to do as I say. Tell her," the mom prompted the cop, who so far hadn't spoken.

"Georgia statutes say that unless you are married or a member of the armed forces, or unless you have been granted emancipation by a judge, you remain subject to the custody of your legal parent or guardian until your eighteenth birthday. That means, if your mother says you're going home, then you're going home."

"I want to see a judge. I want to get emancipated. How do I do that?"

"Well, it's not that easy. First you'd have to get a lawyer. Then the lawyer would have to seek a

court date. It could take months. In the meantime, you would be turning eighteen anyway from what your mother says, so there's really no point."

"Will you please get your stuff so we can quit this nonsense and get out of here?" the mother said. She glanced around at the surrounding campground and its scruffy inhabitants, many in the process of emerging from tents and trailers to check out the invaders, like members of an indigenous tribe curiously studying an expedition of European explorers. Her gaze stopped on two huge dogs tied to adjacent trees. *What are those, wolves?* She wondered.

"It's not nonsense," Sunny said, looking up. "I'm here because you threw me out yesterday morning! You told me to pack my bag and leave!"

"No I didn't, you ran away."

"She's lying!"

"What were you planning on doing about school tomorrow?" Sunny's mother asked. "You're only a month from graduating from high school. Were you going to throw that away? For what? Just to live in the dirt like a homeless person, doing drugs, drinking and having sex!"

"That's not what it's like here."

"Tell me where you slept last night. Did you sleep with one of these guys?" Her eyes swept the circle, which had by now grown considerably larger, her gaze stopping on each of the young men present long enough to deliver an accusatory look

of scorn. "TELL ME!" she shouted. "WHERE DID YOU SLEEP?"

"Wesley let me share his tent."

"Who's Wesley?" she demanded.

Hard Rock glanced at the big blond dragon pusher hovering behind his left shoulder. Wesley was shirtless and barefoot, dressed only in faded drawstring pants. *This will freak her out* Roger thought. The road manager stepped aside while cueing the blond push monkey with his eyes that this might be the moment to make himself known.

"I'm Wesley," the big blond dragon pusher said taking a bold step forward, his long blond hair cascading over his bare shoulders.

"Do you realize this girl is only seventeen years old? What are you, twenty-five?"

"I'm twenty-four."

"Did you know you could be arrested for statutory rape?"

"You're wrong," Sunny corrected. "The age of consent in Georgia is sixteen. I've been able to legally fuck for over a year now."

"Watch your mouth, young lady."

"Technically, ma'am, she's right," the cop said.

"I don't care. She's not going to hang out here having sex with guys in their twenties!"

"I'm gay," Wesley said.

Sunny's mother actually recoiled from Wesley's unembarrassed admission of his sexual orientation, and took a step back from the circle.

“Get your stuff,” she said, recovering. “We’re leaving. You can ride with me or you can ride with this police officer.”

“I’m just going to leave again. You can’t make me stay.”

“I can deliver her,” the policeman said, “but I can’t stick around and make sure she stays.”

“I’m going to just come back here. I want to work this job.”

“Well,” Hattie jumped in, “you won’t stay in our campground at age seventeen.” To Hard Rock she added, “and what are you doing hiding seventeen-year-olds here?”

“She said she was eighteen. We were going to bring her to you tomorrow morning to get her camping straightened out. She just got thrown out of her house yesterday morning.”

“She ran away,” the mother said.

“You’re a liar,” Sunny countered.

“WELL HERE’S THE DEAL,” Hattie shouted, losing patience. “She can’t stay here because she’s under eighteen and she doesn’t have her parent’s consent. Besides that, she’s local, and participants with a local address can’t stay in our campground or we won’t have room for the professional traveling rennies. So the option of running away and coming back here is off the table. But she can still work here if it’s all right with Roger. So my suggestion would be that you”—she spoke directly to Sunny—“agree to return home and finish your

schooling with the understanding that *you*—looking at Sunny’s mother—“agree she’s allowed to continue her job here at the fair. Does that sound like a compromise everybody can live with?”

“I’ll have to think about it,” Sunny’s mother said.

“Well then I’m not coming home,” Sunny retaliated.

“Then I’ll have this officer arrest you.”

“Fine,” Sunny said, extending her arms for handcuffing. “Put me in jail. But you better have me locked up forever because as soon as I’m free, I’m not coming home, I’m leaving.”

“You can’t hold your daughter prisoner,” Hattie continued to coax. She could see the mom was weakening. “A lot of high school and college kids work out here. Most of them do just fine.”

Finally, Sunny’s mother gave in with a nod of the head.

“So, do we have a deal?” Hattie asked.

“Fine,” the mom said.

Sunny went back to Wesley’s tent, returned immediately with her backpack, and marched right up to Hard Rock.

“So, I’ll see you all at morning meeting next Saturday?”

“I...don’t see why not.”

“Are you riding with me,” her mother asked, “or in the police car?”

“The police car.”

Sunny marched to the passenger door of the cruiser and waited for the officer to open it. She was not going to ride in back like a criminal, and she was not going to ride with her mother. After the officer pulled the door open, Sunny tossed her bag on the floor and got in after it. The officer took his seat behind the wheel as the mother got back into her car, and quickly they were gone.

“Nice work,” Hard Rock said to the campground director.

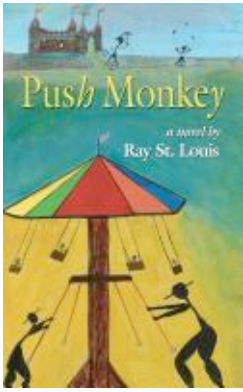
Hattie smiled and got back onto her golf cart. “This old lady’s learned a thing or two over the years.”

“Yes you have. That was masterful.”

“Don’t think that I’m done with you, mister manager,” Hattie said, turning the cart in a tight circle. “You and I are going to have a little refresher course about the rules. Hiding teenagers in the campground; you should know better.”

“We really were going to bring her to you tomorrow morning. It’s opening weekend; we’ve all been kind of busy.”

“Whatever.” The campground director goosed the golf cart and headed toward the office. “DON’T GO ANYWHERE UNTIL I RETURN!” she shouted back as she disappeared in a cloud of dust.



Valerie Polanski (a.k.a. Sunny), age 17, lands a job as a push monkey - human powered ride operator - at her local Renaissance festival. Over her mother's objections, Sunny hits the road with the ride company and the adventure begins. As she travels from fair to fair, Sunny adapts to the "rennie" lifestyle: prolonged tent living, fair affairs, Bizarre Bazaars and Funky Formals. Meanwhile, others are working to bring her freewheeling new life to an end...

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